Southern Reproaches

A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians after Fifty Years. *Edited by William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan. (Louisiana State University Press, 1982.) $12.95.*

I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition. *By Twelve Southerners. New introduction by Louis D. Rubin, Jr.; biographical essays by Virginia Rock. (Louisiana State University Press, 1982.) $6.95.*

Christian humanism, stern criticism of the industrialized mass society, detestation of communism and other forms of collectivism, and attachment to the ways of the Old South were the principles uniting the twelve "Southern Agrarians" who published *I'll Take My Stand* five decades ago. Their twelve essays were approved by T. S. Eliot and some other reflective people when they were published; yet for the most part, the Agrarians met with hostility and ridicule. Today many may read their book with greater understanding and sympathy.

Professors Havard and Sullivan at Vanderbilt University (the center for the Twelve Southerners) have put together a collection of six critical essays (plus interesting discussions and notes) by writers friendly toward the Agrarians. Also there has been published a new edition of *I'll Take My Stand* (which has gone through various editions and printings, though often out of print during the past five decades), with a new introduction by Louis Rubin.

The Twelve Southerners possessed poetic vision. As Dr. Rubin summarizes their principles, their book

> is a rebuke to materialism, a corrective to the worship of Progress, and a reaffirmation of man's aesthetic and spiritual needs. And because the South has come so late into the industrial world, it appeals to the lingering memory within the Southerner's mind of the tranquil and leisurely Southern life that existed before the machines and superhighways came. As such the book constitutes both a reminder and a challenge. *What are you losing that you once possessed?* it says to the modern Southerner. *Are you quite sure that you want to discard it entirely?*

All but three of the original Agrarians have died: Robert Penn Warren, Andrew Nelson Lytle, and Lyle Lanier. The others were Allen Tate, Herman C. Nixon, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, John Donald Wade, John Gould Fletcher, Stark Young, Henry Blue Kline, and Frank Owsley. The most resolute of them all was Donald Davidson, professor of English at Vanderbilt and author of many good books, a masterful essayist and one of the better American poets. (I rank him with Eliot and Frost.) In my file I find a score of letters to me from Professor Davidson. He begins the earliest of them (August 31, 1954) as follows:

> Living in Nashville and teaching at Vanderbilt University is very hard on a Southern Agrarian, I can assure you. It is, in fact, nothing but warfare, and we couldn't survive very long without some place to lick our wounds for a while.

(He wrote this from Ripton, Vermont, to which place he and his wife retreated every summer, taking pains to avoid New York City en route.)

The Twelve Prophets, as Davidson's letter suggests, were without honor at Vanderbilt for some years. As George Core mentions in his essay "Agrarianism, Criticism, and the Academy" (in *A Band of Prophets*), Vanderbilt's administration disparaged the Agrarians and, in effect, would not accept Davidson's and Allen Tate's papers as a gift. The climate of opinion there seems to have altered recently: *A Band of Prophets* results from a formal Vanderbilt conference held in honor of the Agrarians.

> Seven cities now contend for Homer dead,
> Through which the living Homer begged his bread.

For that matter, the literate South generally neglected these Agrarians, the most illustrious of southern sons, in their own time. Only when New York paid attention to Tate, Warren, Ransom, Young, and others did the South perk up its ears.

Despite the attention the Agrarian writers obtained nationally, it was often not easy for them to get their writings published—or, if published, to keep them in

print. In 1938 Donald Davidson published *The Attack on Leviathan* in stern opposition to political and cultural centralization. (Mr. Core calls it Davidson's best book.) I read it when I was an undergraduate that year at Michigan State, and mightily impressed, I took it that Davidson's readers must be numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Years later Davidson wondered that I ever had come upon his *Leviathan,* and in a letter dated June 10, 1955, he explained to me why few copies of his book still existed:

> I now own the copyright; it was assigned to me by the University of North Carolina Press, just a few years ago, after Lambert Davis came in as editor of the Press—and after I had had a terrific row with him. I was assured by my lawyer that I had grounds for a suit against the Press, but I did not have the money to carry the suit through. When Bill Couch [editor of that Press in 1938] printed the book, he left some hundreds of copies in sheets, to be bound up as demand might occur. During the interim, after Couch left and before Davis came in, a man named Wilson filled in as editor. He undertook to "clear the stock room," and since the *Leviathan* had not been selling in quantity, he "pulped" the stock of my book that was in sheets, and so, in effect, put the book out of print, since only a few bound copies remained. But he did not notify me before taking this action and give me the opportunity to buy the stock, as the contract required the publisher to do. Furthermore, I discovered that the Press was withholding from me fees for reprint permission—quite an accumulation of them, it happened—and I had to come down hard on them to get the money that was due me. It was obvious to me that the book was being in effect "suppressed," and though Lambert Davis, Wilson's successor, protested that was not so, I knew very well that if the book had been "liberal" or "radical," rather than "conservative," it would have been kept in print, or would have been reprinted, for it was continually being cited and was in some demand. Davis, by the way, in an interview he had with me in Nashville, had the gall to explain to me that he was a "Christian Socialist."

Too true. Despite the genuine conservatism of most of the Agrarians (Tate having the intrepidity to publish his *Reactionary Essays),* and such tactics employed against them as the pulping that Davidson describes, their high talents as men of letters in the long run gave them ascendancy over the realm of humane letters, even in Manhattan—a domination that endured until recent years, when it was overthrown by the squalid oligarchs of the *New York Review of Books.* John Crowe Ransom later lapsed into a rather dull liberalism, but as a group, the Agrarians illustrated wondrously well the remark made by Lionel Trilling in 1950 that the twentieth-century writers possessed of imagination distinctly were not liberal.

Brutal Buffeting

The Twelve Southerners knew that the South would change. As Stark Young put it in the final paragraph of *I'll Take My Stand,*

> That a change is now in course all over the South is plain; and it is as plain that the South changing must be the South still, remembering that for no thing can there be any completeness that is outside its own nature, and no thing for which there is any advance save in its own kind. If this were not so, all nature by now would have dissolved in chaos and folly, nothing in it . . .

Yet the South's pace of change has been more rapid and overwhelming than even the gloomiest of the twelve expected. Old Nashville has been thoroughly demolished and uglified, Strickland's capitol on its hill besieged by the haughty office towers of state and federal bureaucracy. Davidson lamented to me when I spoke at Vanderbilt in 1955 that the campus had been converted into metered parking lots. Architectural continuity has been broken in the southern states; never again, presumably, will there be southern architectural styles. Much else has gone by the board.

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With the dwindling of a distinctive Dixieland has come relative economic prosperity. Even so oldfangled a place as Farmville, in Southside Virginia, one of the two most distinctively southern regions of the South (the other being middle Tennessee), is bustling and almost affluent compared with what it was only two decades ago. The agricultural pattern of existence, which the Agrarians praised, still endures here and there south of Mason's and Dixon's line, but it has been brutally buffeted during the past fifty years.

Andrew Lytle, a hard hater of a consolidated industrialized and urbanized society, is eighty years old now—and still in arms against the New South. His contribution to *I'll Take My Stand,* "The Hind Tit," remains a realistic and persuasive sketch of the healthiness of southern life before the "good roads" commenced the destruction of the old rural pattern. Since he wrote, the welfare state has done its best to wipe out, as impoverished and culturally deprived, such survivals of southern vitality.

To wipe out southerners of the type of Lytle and Davidson may be more difficult. Modernity is doing its best to accomplish such liquidation by sweeping away—in the South and elsewhere—the sort of schooling that such men as Lytle and Davidson profited by.

Tide what may betide, the Southern Agrarians will loom large in histories of American thought and letters. With liberalism in America now nearly mindless, some of the rising generation may find in *I'll Take My Stand* an understanding of personal and social order far removed from desiccated liberal attitudes.

Russell Kirk